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ABSTRACT

This symposium paper examines policy formation in early childhood education in terms of the functions, consequences, and implications of ideological conflicts. A definition of ideology is presented, and reasons are given in the context of this definition as to why an unreliable data base is the cause for current ideological battles in early childhood education. Ideological camps (Piagetians, Behaviorists, neo-Freudians, Open Educators) are viewed as tending to avoid evidence counter to their beliefs, primarily by rejecting each other's "data" as inadmissible evidence. Therefore, it is concluded that policy decisions cannot be made on the basis of evidence, for what we are willing to accept as evidence is a function of our ideologies. (CS)

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POLICY FORMATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY[1]

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I would like to speak to issues related to policy in early childhood education from the special perspective of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education (located at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana). As director of the Clearinghouse for more than four years I have had an opportunity to observe the flow of documents as well as inquiries, and to interact regularly with three of the groups of stakeholders in the field: the front-line workers in programs, day care centers and classes, the research and development workers in laboratories, campuses and industries, and government policy implementors at state, regional and federal levels. I would like to share some concerns and questions which emerge from this post of observation and the experiences associated with it.

Problems of Ideology

One of the most salient aspects of the field of early childhood education is the sharp divergence of views among workers and clients concerning what young children "need" as well as how and when these "needs" should be satisfied. (See for example Maccoby and Zellner, 1970; Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972; Biber and Franklin, in press.) In the formal research and development literature, exchanges of these divergent views are typically couched in the languages of theory, methodology, and evaluation (cf. Stanley, 1973, Anderson, 1973).

In the Clearinghouse we frequently receive inquiries which ask us to "send something that shows that model X does (or does not) work." Occasionally a

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legislative assistant, or a state official asks "What do the experts say about teaching X to preschoolers?" Perhaps the most common case of conflicting views is expressed in questions about the "effects" of "structured" versus "unstructured" curriculum models. Inquirers are typically chagrined if not resentful when we inform them that "it depends on which expert you consult."

Akers captures the national pattern when he says

> The American public seems always to seek "the" way...This pressure has contributed to competition among various...projects, leading to pronouncements of superiority or greater effectiveness of this approach over that. The worker in the field has been left either in a position of confusion and dilemma or of unyielding commitment to a particular program. (Akers, 1972, p. 7.)

I would like to propose that the habitual argumentativeness in the field can be best understood and appreciated when set within the framework of ideological rather than theoretical conflicts. I would like to discuss briefly some functions, consequences and implications of the ideological conflicts in early childhood education.

Ideology Defined

The term ideology has many definitions (see Naess, 1956). For the purposes of this discussion, I find the definition proposed by Tomkins (1965) to be quite relevant. Tomkins takes ideology to mean

> Any organized set of ideas about which human beings are at once most articulate and most passionate, and for which there is no evidence and about which they are least certain (Tomkins, 1965, p. 73).

In addition to these characteristics, ideologies seem to contain within them naive theories which attempt to establish and/or explain the relationships among events and phenomena. Such theories are typically related to an ideal conception of humanity and the good life. (Naess, 1956, p. 164.) Although the term usually carries with it derogatory connotations, I wish to point out here that ideologies serve important functions and indeed, are probably indispensable.

Functions of Ideologies

My basic assumption here is that in any field in which the data base is unreliable (especially in terms of its validity) the vacuum created by such data weakness is filled by ideologies. Early childhood education is a field especially susceptible to data weakness for several reasons.

First, the object of inquiry--the young child--is, by definition immature. This immaturity has two consequences. One is that the organism is unstable. Mature organisms are relatively stable, if not rigid. But observed changes in young children may signal either instrument insufficiency, construct weakness, or growth, or all of the above in unspecifiable proportions. A second consequence of immaturity is that the organism is relatively powerless. The young child cannot get up and leave a day care center when he does not like the quality of care. He may bite, vomit, wet or "act out." But his power to modify adults' responses is small. It seems reasonable to assume that the more powerless a client (or subject in an investigation) is, the more important the worker's ethics--nested in an ideology--become.

Secondly, the definitive or critical experiments which might settle important empirical questions cannot be performed. As long as we have any reasons to believe that something is "good" for children, it would be unethical to withhold it from them just for the sake of the advancement of science.

Taken together, these constraints on the development of a reliable data base, and the felt pressure to protect the powerless through commitments of sentiment (Katz, 1971) provide an ideal scene against which to stage ideological battles.

Consequences of Ideological Conflict

One of the apparent consequences of the ideological character of the field is the development of encampments: Piagetians, Behaviorists, neo-Freudians,

Open Educators, etc. Each camp seems to avoid the examination of counter-evidence, primarily by rejecting each other's "data" as inadmissable evidence. This state of affairs leads to statements such as those summarized in Rosenshine's law as follows:

> There are some things tests cannot measure. These are among the most important of all. Our students did best on these. (Rosenshine, 1972.)

Another apparent consequence of the ideological character of the field is its susceptibility to charismatic leaders. According to Nisbet (1966), charismatic authority in religion or politics

> is that wielded by an individual who is able to show through revelation, magical power, or simply through boundless personal attraction...a unique force of command that overrides in popular estimation all that is bequeathed by either tradition or law (Nisbet, 1966, p. 143).

Cohen (1969) has written persuasively to show Madame Montessori as a charismatic case in point in the field of early childhood education. As with ideological camps, charismatic leaders and their followers tend to avoid counter-evidence as well as the kinds of cross-camp intellectual intercourse which might serve to advance the question asking and problem posing activities of the field.

Implications of Ideological Conflict

One of the most obvious implications of early childhood education's reliance on ideology is its susceptibility to fads and bandwagons. As long as we are responding to powerful claims and/or personalities rather than to reliable evidence, programs and practices will fluctuate with the rise, fall and resurrection of various "in" ideologies.

Secondly, I would like to speak especially to what I observe to be a two-way sophistication gap. In frequent contacts with front-line workers in the field, I am often amazed to note the extraordinary lack of sophistication in terms of whatever is known (with any reliability) about child growth and

development. Similarly, in frequent contact with the knowledge producers in the field of child growth and development, I am impressed by their extraordinary lack of sophistication in terms of what it takes to work day after day, in typically disheartening environments, with very small and dependent children. I see as my central task in the Clearinghouse that of trying to teach each one of these two groups about the other. It is no easy task; one has to have credibility in both groups; one has also to work at cultivating and strengthening one's respect and understanding of each group's "needs" and temptations (see Katz, 1971). In addition, I sometimes find it my responsibility to teach governmental policy formulators as well as implementors about each of these groups. For the social scientist, skepticism toward her data is functional, hence desirable; for the front-line worker, strong conviction serves as a necessary motive for action; for the policy-maker, a proper balance of skepticism and conviction seems to be required, although difficult.

Finally, if there is any single point I would like to teach the policy formulators concerning early childhood education, it is that policy decisions cannot--not even in the ideal case--be made on the basis of "evidence." For what we are willing to accept as evidence is also a function of our ideologies. It seems to me that the basic decisions in education are always moral decisions--an activity in which there are no experts, but rather political pressures and counter-pressures, leaders and followers, and a large indifferent group. No matter how carefully such policies may be developed, their implementations and evaluations occur in contexts of sometimes passionate and often bitter ideological controversies--perhaps a fact of life specialists must learn to accept with understanding, insight, and forbearance.

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